

Comparing Conventional and Feminist Views of Business

CV Harquail, PhD

Excerpted from *Feminism: a Key Idea for Business*, (Routledge, 2020)

For insight about how feminist businesses and business people differ from conventional ones, it helps to clarify how conventional business view the world, and then compare this to how feminist businesses view the world.

Conventional business and feminist business perspectives have very different approaches to three central questions:

- (1) What should be the goals of business and work?
- (2) How should collective control and coordination be achieved?
- (3) What values will lead to a business's success?

To help you anticipate, organize, and focus the feminist critique of business, the table on the next page outlines some key ways that conventional business and feminism answer these important questions. The text that follows adds more detail to these ideas.

Conventional businesses emphasize concepts in the left column, and feminist perspectives emphasize concepts in the column on the right. Both columns are strategic simplifications of the perspectives.

Although the table is set up in two columns, this is not to put the concepts in a binary, either/or relationship. Either/or thinking usually leads people to favor one view over another, ending up with dominating and marginalized perspectives. Feminist argue for 'both/and' thinking that considers that both options might have value, and that there might be additional options to consider too.

For all three questions, conventional perspectives and feminist perspectives differ. Feminist views emphasize values, processes, and goals that are simply not part of business as usual.

CONVENTIONAL BUSINESS

FEMINIST BUSINESS

What should the goals of business be?

Production
Extraction
Profit for owners
Accumulating wealth
Transactions
Organizational needs
Market priorities

Reproduce, regenerate, invent
Create value (\$\$/♥) for ALL
Facilitate relationships
Distribute wealth
Meet community needs
Meet individual needs
Flourishing

How should we run our business?

Dominance via power-over
Hierarchy
Competition
Scarcity thinking
Ownership of few over many

Mutuality, Power-with
Democracy
Flatter, peer-to-peer networks
Cooperation & Collaboration
Shared ownership
Shared governance

What values will lead to business success?

Individual achievement
Self-actualization
Autonomy
Instrumental orientation
Meritocratic ideology
White Androcentrism
Hegemonic masculinity

Interdependence
Equality, equity, justice
Inclusive 'universal design'
Gender & identity multiplicity
Recognizing Intrinsic value
Eco/Systems' health

Q 1. What should be the goals of business and work?

Conventionally, we understand that the goal of a business is to make and sell things to generate profits. Profits will reward the owners and investors for their investment of money, and wages reward the employees for their investment of time and energy. Employees' wages form their livelihood and help support their dependents. Businesses help owners accumulate wealth by generating profits. They prioritize the needs of the owners and the organization over those of employees as a group, and they emphasize transactional exchanges (e.g., time for money, money for product, ownership stake for capital investment) within a marketplace.

Businesses focus on producing things that can be sold, and they emphasize the efficient use of resources, which means extracting the most that they can from the resources they use while paying as little as possible for their use of them.

The feminist view, in contrast, defines the goal of a business as providing what people and communities need to live good lives, through the products the business creates, the wages the business pays, and the work that the business engages in. Feminists focus not on wealth accumulation but on "provisioning" (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Power, 2004), the task of providing everyone with basic goods and services, and creating and distributing things necessary for life. They seek abundance for everyone rather than wealth for the few.

A feminist view of business also takes a full cycle, full systems perspective to address both production and reproduction. It cares not only about extracting value from resources but also about regenerating, renewing, and recycling these resources. The full cycle, full systems view of feminist business refuses to separate transactions from relationships and instead recognizes that the goal of a business is to create mutually sustaining relationships among all stakeholders.

Q2. How should businesses achieve collective coordination and control ?

Organizations bring people and interests together, and coordinate and control all of these disparate actors, interests, and activities needed to achieve the business's goals. In conventional business thinking, the mechanisms for coordinating different interests and offering shared direction emphasize dominance and obedience, power and submission. Control and coordination can be achieved through the formal structure of an organization, with reporting relationships, formal authority, methods for disciplining and punishing, motivating and rewarding stakeholders. With detachment, neutrality, and rationality, processes should be broken down into components to produce the most efficient outcomes (Mumby and Putman, 1992).

Conventional businesses assume that dominance (and the force that it implies) is something to strive for. Just think about the concept of market domination. Whether it's customer mindshare or a subordinate's responsiveness, having power over others seems appropriate.

Rather than having power and authority via dominance, feminist business thinking emphasizes developing "power-with" (Follett, 1924) other people, groups, and actors, through mutual recognition and for mutual gain. Feminists emphasize power that comes from consent and by building relationships (aka power-with), as well as individuals' power-to that reflects agency. Rather than emphasizing competition, fighting and "winner takes all" logic, feminist business thinking prioritizes cooperation, collaboration, and mutual benefit with a more limited role for competition. Rather than restricting ownership of the firm, the firm's outcomes, and the firms' profits to the few who provide financial capital, ownership also accrues to those who provide labor, energy, creativity, and time. Rather than capital-based ownership being the source of authority, the democratic consensus of central stakeholders is the source of authority and decision making.

Coordination and control in conventional businesses depend on hierarchies where those higher up have authority and status over those below them. The higher a person is, the more important they are relative to those below them. Feminists, with their emphasis on equality among individuals, prefer organizational structures that reflect peer-to-peer relationships, networks, and webs (Helgesen, 1995). Some hierarchy where differences in authority are based on legitimate authority (e.g., expertise, democratic representation) is appropriate and functional (Freeman, 1972).

Q3. What values will lead to business success?

Each perspective emphasizes the values that shape its worldview. Believing that autonomy and sovereign independence is the most desired state of human accomplishment, conventional business emphasizes individual achievement and self-actualization. People and action are valued to the degree that they help the individual and the organization achieve their goals. Believing that organizations are rational and designed as gender- and race-blind meritocracies suggests that anyone can succeed and that the cream will naturally rise to the top (Seron, et al., 2018).

Men /male /masculine employees are the norm and the ideal, anything that fits with the androcentric, male model is good. Anything that doesn't fit the male default is not only abnormal but also tainted. For example, masculine rationality is associated with good business practice while feminine emotionality is bad for it (Dougherty and Drumheller, 2006). Thus, individual behavior and organizational systems should reinforce a hierarchy that privileges men, male-typed behaviors, and masculine characteristics because these will lead to individual and organizational success. Meanwhile, demonstrating female-typed behaviors and feminine characteristics is not only less valued and less valuable, but also will contribute to failure.

Within the feminist business worldview, the goal of business is not simply individual achievement or organizational success but also includes flourishing for everyone. Interdependence, knowing that each must contribute their own strength to support the group and that the group is critical for the individual's success, replaces conventional business's focus on independence. People, actions, and outcomes are valued not simply for what they help us achieve but also for their own sake, for the world being a better place because they exist. This means, for example, that all employees are valuable as human beings regardless of how efficient they are as workers. Neither their work performance nor their jobs' status determines their social value.

Organizations, roles, and work should be designed so that they can use the skills and fit the bodies of any human, not just male ones, with a kind of universal design that recognizes important differences and fits the vast majority. Universal design makes it possible for people to contribute and succeed when they behave in ways that are not male-typed or masculine but instead reflect their own understanding of their gender genre and style.